2021 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title of the Story: Smart and sustainable management of 516 Arouca

Destination Name: (include any state, province or region)
Arouca Geopark

Country: Portugal

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Position: Tourism Technician

Nomination Category: (Please check the boxes that indicate the focus of your story)
- Localizing the destination supply chain
- Decarbonizing the destination supply chain
- Culture & Communities
- Environment & Climate
- Nature & Ecotourism
- Tourism Reset & Recovery
- Other

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Should you have any questions on your submission please refer to our FAQ page or contact top100@greendestinations.org
DESCRIBE YOUR GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.

Issues faced
On May 2 of this year, 516 Arouca was inaugurated. This is an infrastructure with 516 m long, 1.20 m wide and consists of 127 decks made of metal grating and steel cables, with a height of 175 m above the Paiva River. As the largest suspension pedestrian bridge in the world, it has a system in which 2 sets of hangers, start from each of the catenaries and connect to the various decks. It has the capacity to support 2,000 people simultaneously. It is in the middle of the Paiva valley, in the vicinity of the Paiva Walkways, part of the Arouca UNESCO Global Geopark, linking the two banks of the Paiva river. It is thus a new and exciting way of looking at the Paiva region, its walkways and all the natural beauty of Arouca Geopark.

At the time of its opening, given the characteristics of this new tourist attraction, the media coverage exceeded all expectations, leading to 516 Arouca making the news in several international communication channels, including intercontinental ones. Alongside the media, the demand was immediate, leading us to adopt policies and strategies to face mass tourism and promote responsible and sustainable tourism. The experience in managing entrances to the Paiva Walkways was an asset to not run the risk of excessive tourist pressure in this location classified as Rede Natura 2000.

Thus, an online booking system was implemented, with controlled limits and timetables and whose visits are always accompanied by guides who, in addition to interpreting the infrastructure and the landscape, play a role in raising awareness of sustainable conduct and practices.

Methods, steps and tools applied
In terms of communication, it has a specific website (https://516arouca.pt), currently available in Portuguese and English, and will soon be available in Spanish, French and German. Tickets are sold exclusively online at bookings.cm-arouca.pt. An app is currently being developed to facilitate the purchase of bridge tickets and access to other relevant information.

The municipality’s booking center, which was created to incorporate the bridge’s ticketing service, as well as other municipal tourist, cultural and sporting infrastructures, and which is in the process of development, includes a business intelligence module with a view to collecting, among other information, KPI’s and data to improve interaction with visitors and the creation of integrated tourist and cultural packages, oriented towards the customer profile.

Inaugurated in the midst of a pandemic and considering that the tourism sector is one of the most affected by this public emergency, 516 Arouca is proving to be a tourist attraction at local, regional and national level, having received more than 37,000 visitors in just over 3 months of operation, a number that will tend to be more expressive as the containment measures not only nationally, but also internationally, keep decreasing. It is therefore an important asset for tourist entertainment companies and accommodation units, particularly at the local level, enabling the creation of new programs and improving statistical indicators, such as increased average stay, occupancy rates (both accommodation and restaurants) and REVPAR. Another example of the impact of this infrastructure on tourism development and the affirmation of the Arouca Geopark destination at an international level was the fact that it was chosen as the space for the presentation of the tourism promotion campaign of Turismo de Portugal, which took place last June.

The visit to 516 Arouca is made exclusively by certified guides from the infrastructure or associated with local tourist entertainment companies. All were trained on the classifications of the territory (Arouca Geopark and...
Rede Natura 2000, on its strategic and tourist assets, on the bridge itself (engineering, construction process, etc.) and on the surroundings (geodiversity, biodiversity, historical and cultural heritage).

Additionally, to control the flow and quality of visitation, 516 Arouca employs a team of controllers, responsible for the proper functioning of the infrastructure and support for visitors/guides. This team, along with the team of “resident” guides, is trained in first aid as well as in managing panic/stress situations.

This place is a privileged place for educational visits, with a special focus on geology, as it allows us to accurately understand some of the Earth’s dynamics, with regard to geological faults and water behavior in different types of rock.

Being part of UNESCO Global Geoparks and inserted in an classified area as Rede Natura 2000, and despite the fact that the bridge could support up to 2,000 people simultaneously, reduced visiting groups were created, defining specific visiting hours, with a view to providing a quality visit and, at the same time, reducing the carrying capacity over the territory. The access to the bridge is also made by pedestrian paths, having been used the existing parking lots outside the bridge area. To avoid the use of plastic bottles, a drinking fountain was implemented, and recycling bins were made available to separate garbage and ashtrays (the latter to be installed in August). It is also pertinent to mention that the act of booking is exclusively online, avoiding the printing of tickets and invoices, reducing the ecological footprint.

Key success factors

The extensive experience in managing the flows of the Paiva Walkways and the correction of past mistakes, has resulted in a proactive management of this new tourist attraction, avoiding negative impacts at an environmental level.

Additionally, we knew that, since the bridge was inaugurated in the middle of the pandemic, it would benefit, as it is located in a natural and low-density territory, from the trend of tourist demand for these spaces.

Despite the pandemic situation, the opening of 516 Arouca fostered entrepreneurship, with new agents of tourist entertainment and local accommodation having emerged, often by young people who end up creating their own jobs and settling in the territory. Additionally, we believe that, given the flow management, the reduced number of daily visitors and the 516 Arouca projection, the seasonality index will significantly decrease, maintaining the demand for this new infrastructure continuously throughout the year.

Aiming at environmental, economic and social sustainability, so important in this pandemic period, every effort was made to ensure that the benefits outweighed the disadvantages.

Lessons learned

Currently, we can be pleased to have an organized tourist demand, controlled flows, little tourist pressure and, at the same time, an increase in the economy, an increase in entrepreneurship, fixation of young people, attraction of new investors with new perspectives about Arouca Geopark destination. Outside companies such as travel agencies or other tour operators have started to work on the destination, something that, until now, was difficult to do. In Arouca, there is still a lack of accommodation, although, little by little, the hotel capacity has been increasing. It is our mission to attract investment in the hotel sector to face this gap, something that seems more and more possible, given the projection that 516 Arouca is having, allied to quality tourism and good practices implemented in management and infrastructure, or from the destination, in general.

Results, achievements and recognitions
Selected by Ordem dos Engenheiros as one of the most emblematic works of the beginning of the century, being included in a book with the best of Portuguese engineering in the 21st century to mark 85 years of that entity. Selected by Time magazine as one of the 100 destinations to visit in 2021. Best Public Project in the Engineering Area of the "Construction 2020 Awards".

Nominated at the World Travel Award 2021 in the category "Europe’s Leading Tourist Attraction Development Project".

Additional references
516 Arouca is present on social networks, with its own pages https://www.facebook.com/516arouca and https://www.instagram.com/516arouca/. It also has a set of promotional and dissemination videos which are available on the YouTube channel of the Municipality of Arouca (https://www.youtube.com/user/MunicipioArouca) and on the respective social networks. Since its construction, 516 Arouca has had a high media presence, reaching its peak when it opened to the public, in May of this year, with the realization of several reports worldwide. It has been chosen as the setting for advertising campaigns such as the sports brand Solomon and others (launch of the national and international tourism campaign by Turismo de Portugal). It is also part of the third season episode of the National Geographic series "Europe from Above".